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C O N F I D E N T I A L COLOMBO 000196

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: SPRING LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS MAY
PROVIDE REPORT CARD ON EARLY DAYS OF RAJAPAKSA,S PRESIDENCY

Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE FOR REASONS 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: The Elections Commissioner has called for candidate nominations to Local Governments (LGs) to be submitted between February 9-16, with elections to fall four to six weeks afterward. A local NGO and the opposition United National Party (UNP) have filed court cases requesting a re-assessment of voter rolls prior to the LG elections. While local concerns and the politics of personality may have the greatest impact on LG polls, the election results could also indicate the political mood of the populace three months into Mahinda Rajapaksa's presidency. End Summary.

LG ELECTIONS: A PRIMER

12. (C) The Elections Commissioner has asked political parties to submit nominations for candidates to run in the Local Government (LG) elections between February 9 and February 16. The elections themselves will be held four to six weeks from the end of the nomination period. The last LG elections were held in March 2002. For the first time, all of the polling will take place on a single day. The LG Authorities cover 18 Municipal Councils with a total of 291 members; 42 Urban Councils with a total of 372 members; and 270 Pradeshiya Sabha, or Village Councils, with a total of 3,090 members.

13. (C) In a January 31 meeting with poloff, Viraj Perera of the Ministry of Provincial Councils and Local Government assessed that many voters mistakenly believe that LGs can provide employment or educational opportunities rather than their actual mandate, which includes responsibility for playgrounds, pre-schools, community centers, health clinics, waste management services, and fire departments. According to Perera, LGs fund the bulk of these initiatives through money from the central government. LGs also receive money from the nine provincial councils and raise funds through property assessments, event licensing fees, and entertainment taxes.

COURT CASES TO REQUEST A
RE-EVALUATION OF ELECTORAL ROLLS

¶4. (C) Although the date of elections is yet to be decided, Kingsley Rodrigo, director of the local election monitoring NGO People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL), has lodged a court case requesting a stay on elections to review voter rolls and re-assess the requirement that voters produce identification at the polls. In a January 31 meeting with poloff, Rodrigo explained that in the November 2005 presidential election, no one who had reached the voting age of eighteen after June 1, 2004 was permitted to register to vote. According to Rodrigo, this disenfranchised 400,000 people. He added that over 250,000 internally displaced persons were also effectively disenfranchised since they cannot return to where they are registered to vote. Furthermore, Rodrigo asserted voter rolls in the north and the east, which have 650,000 names for around 300,000 resident voters, should be purged. The rolls are inaccurate because security concerns make it difficult to conduct an accurate census. In a February 6 phone conversation, PAFFREL's counsel J.C. Weliamuna said the court will hear the case on February 13.

¶5. (C) In a February 1 meeting with poloff, United National Party (UNP) Deputy General Secretary Tissa Attanayake, whose party currently controls

90 percent of LGs, noted that the UNP is also filing a court case to demand that 2004 voter rolls be used to determine voter eligibility. He said that that the 2005 electoral registers had disenfranchised voters with names deleted from the list at random. According to PAFFREL's lawyer Weliamuna, the UNP is due to present its case in court February 7.

UNP'S CAMPAIGN

¶6. (C) The March 2002 LG elections followed on the heels of UNP success in national elections, permitting the UNP to ride momentum and win control of ninety percent of the LGs. Attanayake said that the UNP will not contest in the Northern Province, much of which is Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)-controlled and where an LTTE-enforced boycott turned the presidential election against the UNP last November. Nevertheless, Attanayake said, the party has already identified over 3,000 candidates to run in the other districts. According to Attanayake, once these candidates are officially nominated, they will canvas from house to house in their areas. He said the candidates would highlight issues such as waste management and maintenance of small thoroughfares, but assessed that ultimately, LG elections will be decided primarily on the candidates' personal appeal and connection to the voters. He added that the UNP is in discussions with the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, the Ceylon Workers' Congress, and the United People's Front to contest the LG elections under a single umbrella.

JVP'S VIEWS

¶7. (C) In a February 6 meeting with polff, Tilvin Silva, General Secretary of the Marxist, Sinhalese

nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peremuna (JVP), said his party may coordinate its campaign with the governing Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) but will likely run independently. Silva said that the JVP has requested leadership of one-third of the LGs in case of a joint SLFP-JVP campaign-a demand the SLFP has not yet accepted. Silva noted that the JVP has been open in pointing out the government's areas for improvement, but he added that since national issues will not play a role in LG elections, the JVP will not be at odds with the SLFP. Silva said the JVP will wait until after the close of nominations to plan a campaign strategy.

POLLING IN NORTH AND EAST?

18. (C) In a February 3 meeting, Jaffna Government Agent K. Ganesh told emboffs that Jaffna did not hold LG elections in 2002 because of security concerns. Instead, he said, Jaffna's administrators were appointed, disappointing some of the local populace. Ganesh did not speculate on whether polls will be conducted in Jaffna this year. As yet, it is unclear whether the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), having just enforced a voting boycott during the November presidential election, will permit polling in the LG elections.

COMMENT

19. (C) As the UNP's Attanayake noted, candidates' personalities may outweigh campaign issues in the minds of voters. Nevertheless, for many electors, political parties are inextricably linked with national platforms and issues such as the ethnic question. While driven primarily by local issues, the LG elections will to some extent provide a report card on voter perception of President Rajapaksa's first three months in office. LTTE willingness to allow LG elections in areas under its control may be influenced by their satisfaction with the cease-fire talks slated for later this month in Geneva.

LUNSTEAD